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ABSTRACT

Individuals in general and educators in particular should be knowledgeable about and understand the social implications of contingency and freedom. Contingency--a possible or unforeseen occurrence--is interpreted in light of the unpredictability of nature which insures that people cannot be prepared for every possibility. Freedom is interpreted as the desire to be liberated from the control of some person or arbitrary power. Education contributes to the concept of freedom by enhancing human potential through reason and it should be viewed as a means of bringing out the best qualities of people. Society, in contrast, is often dominated by political leaders who are motivated more by a desire to control than to serve with caution, integrity, and flexibility. For example, it is frequently alleged that Robert S. McNamara (Secretary of Defense in President John F. Kennedy's administration) applied overly mechanical and excessively rigid technological processes to complicated social and political situations. Educators should help students become more critical of social and political phenomena by encouraging them to be curious in addition to transmitting knowledge to them. And, perhaps most important, educators must strive to be creative scholars and must not be overly influenced by governmental policies and grants.
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Contingency and Freedom: Important Concepts for
An Educated Society

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ABSTRACT

The concepts of contingency and freedom are explained and defined in relation to contemporary events that have attempted to control people primarily through bureaucratic, technological processes. An attempt is made to identify contingency and freedom as important concepts for educators. The point is made that individuals need to be knowledgeable and understand the implications of contingency and freedom, particularly in higher education.

Contingency and Freedom: Important Concepts for
An Educated Society

The idea that order and efficiency are needed for progress is contained in the rhetoric of the industrial age. Man's rational powers to control events through technology was given a boost in this country after World War II. The United States emerged as a legitimate superpower, and new technologies were available. People of power and influence became more dependent on the craft of technology. This post-industrial era has been characterized by a growth of technocrats in various forms (academic, business, political and social endeavors).

Early in the 1960s the idea of efficiency through a controlled, rational process flourished in the form of what might be called the "McNamara syndrome." Robert S. McNamara was selected as Secretary of Defense by John F. Kennedy's administration, because he was considered to be a bright, aggressive, rational manager that exuded efficiency. He had considerable confidence--a confidence that bordered on arrogance. David Halberstam, in describing McNamara, said, "If the body was tense and driven, the mind was mathematical, analytical, bringing order and reason out of chaos. Always reason. And reason supported by facts, by statistics--he could prove his rationality with facts, intimidate others. He was marvelous with charts and statistics."¹ This may be an example of what Wittgenstein meant when he said, "We may be irresistibly attracted by a notation."²

Indeed McNamara was a driven man; he loved power and sought it. "He was intelligent, forceful, courageous, decent, everything, in fact but wise."³ McNamara knew very little ". . . about Asia, about poverty, about people, about American domestic politics, but he knew a great deal about production technology and about exercising bureaucratic power."⁴ He played a key role in the Vietnam tragedy. McNamara represents cold, rigid technological efficiency applied to the decision making process at a high level within government. This process was deceptive and ultimately proved to be tragic. The rhetoric and methods of science were misused as tools to wield power. The "McNamara syndrome" represents a power hungry, mechanical process being applied to complicated social and political events. The historical past is not seriously studied, and the human element is reduced or disregarded. Only quantifiable information is used. The process can be quite impressive in a superficial way.

Most certainly Robert McNamara was considered to be an educated, well-meaning individual when he joined Kennedy's administration, but he was blinded in many ways while in control of the Department of Defense. The aura of efficiency and power can be deceptive. This gap in the education and experience of leadership is not unique. The power of an office can frequently act as a destructive, threatening force. The human aspect gets lost. Human values are often reduced or ignored within the bureaucratic process. Ego boosting, self-serving activity can distort reality and minimize the complications involved with human

events. By depending on quantifiable information, one may underestimate the human spirit. It is impossible to accurately measure such traits as: character, courage, loyalty, diligence, and patience. Indeed, it is most difficult to define these traits. Alfred North Whitehead has explained that each profession makes progress in its own groove of abstractions, but there is no groove of abstractions which is adequate for the comprehension of human life.⁵

Humans are a product of nature, and they tend to resist methods of control that may lead to efficiency and predictability. A cynical view of this problem states that what we have learned from history is that we do not learn from history. History provides ample evidence that human beings are imperfect. This important aspect of our behavior must be understood in order to survive in a changing technical environment that can amplify human error. We are living in an era that provides great destructive power to imperfect beings.

The Watergate scandal is another deplorable record of bright, college educated people functioning at the highest levels of government. It has been said that the Pentagon Papers and transcripts of the White House tapes (relating to Watergate) are two of the most discouraging documents of our time. Educators should be quite concerned about a society that is responsible for these events. These documents are symbols of deception and corruption by our leadership in an age of unparalleled, technical sophistication. This is a serious problem. Power in the hands of deceptive

people has always been a threat to the democratic concept. The fact that more sophisticated technology is now available requires more caution, integrity, and flexibility in an atmosphere of contingency and freedom.

The significance of contingency and freedom is due to the fact that these concepts relate to human nature. Contingency represents the unpredictability of nature--events can happen accidentally and without design. Man cannot be prepared for every possibility. There are too many variables in the world that cannot be mastered. Sophisticated technology is a good example of how man's ingenuity, motivated by a desire to control, is now threatening world safety (one need to go no further than nuclear weapons with this theme). Contingency provides a never ending challenge. Truth is not static; it is a continuous search exercised by enlightened individuals.

Freedom represents man's desire to be liberated from the control of some person or arbitrary power. This noble quality is a unique human characteristic that has been refined and institutionalized. Education contributes to the concept of freedom in many ways and should be viewed as a vital aspect that is capable of bringing out the best qualities of man. Human potential is usually enhanced through Reason. Today the so-called reasonable approach may be the only alternative to combat technological chaos.

"The world is a superb example not of order, such as we associate with the idea of Providence in action, but the reverse,

disorder, the result of contingency and freedom."⁶ The technocrats of the world may not understand the significance of that statement. As technology has come to serve, it has also tended to harness and confine. This unique process makes for control and precision in an environment that resists such attempts. These efforts to control can be sinister to the degree that people are unaware that control is being applied. We have evidence of the most menacing type of manipulation in today's world.

In order for people to be free, particularly in a complicated technological environment, they must be knowledgeable, patient, and thoughtful. Freedom is the product of reflection.

Genuine freedom, in short, is intellectual; it rests in the trained power of thought, in ability to 'turn things over,' to look at matters deliberately, to judge whether the amount and kind of evidence requisite for decision is at hand, and if not, to tell where and how to seek such evidence. If a man's actions are not guided by thoughtful conclusions, then they are guided by inconsiderate impulse, unbalanced appetite, caprice, or the circumstances of the moment. To cultivate unhindered, unreflective external activity is to foster enslavement, for it leaves the person at the mercy of appetite, sense, and circumstance.⁷

Educators should understand the meaning of contingency and freedom as these concepts apply to their students and contemporary events. In attempting to give emphasis to the atrocities of genocide during World War II, Leon Hymovitz said, "Our youth must learn that the cardinal sin is the sin of ignorance."⁸ Freedom is frequently misunderstood. A free choice is always limited in some degree by the knowledge of the person who is choosing. Educators must transmit knowledge, but they must also

encourage students to be curious with spirited minds. Students must be prepared for life's contingencies. Every thinker from Plato down has stated that any education worth the name must make of each pupil a self-propelling individual--one who not only has learned but can continue to learn.⁹ Our students should be taught to think and to continue this process throughout their lives. Truth can be discovered in relation to the labor that is part of action and the process of life. Truth and vigor complement each other but should be mediated by reflection and patience. Knowledge does not guarantee truth, but truth requires knowledge in an endless process.

If our society understands the virtue of freedom and the inevitability of contingency, then institutions of education should identify these concepts as being significant. Students need to study and probe in order to be able to experience freedom and understand contingency in an environment that often uses subtle and insidious methods. The public should come to understand that education (either formal or informal) is a dynamic process used by wise people to understand themselves and their environment. Freedom and contingency are defined and explored through the continuous acquisition of knowledge.

This continuing process of education helps to develop the human spirit. Education is charged with the responsibility to produce reasonable persons that are unafraid and flexible. This is a tall order, and it seems that our society in recent years has produced more technocratic, cheerful robots than thinkers free and flexible.

If the general public does not consider freedom and contingency to be important, our leadership should understand the need for these concepts to be exercised. A flexible approach is healthy--". . . the mind that can only tolerate one approach to understanding reality is the same kind of mind that must impose one all-embracing structure of power if it ever gets into the position of doing so."¹⁰ A President of the United States that can understand and appreciate the artistic interpretations of Willie Nelson and Vladimir Horowitz (both have performed in the White House during the Carter administration) displays a multidimensional approach to reality. Our leadership needs to respect the concepts of freedom and contingency in various forms (artistic as well as the political, social, economic, intellectual and religious aspects of life). It is unfortunate, but frequently those who become leaders have followed a devious path, and they have little respect for freedom and contingency. The world of leadership operates in a subtle fashion to control and manipulate. While the politician or bureaucrat is talking, technology is at work behind the scenes. What we hear, read, and see must be questioned and processed with considerable scrutiny. A society that intends to be free must challenge and lash out at ideas and political rhetoric. A vigorous spirit coupled with a courageous approach are required.

The exercise of a free and flexible approach within society is healthy. It is vital for citizens with various interests and talents to understand their rights and responsibilities to

preserve a free society. Our institutions of education have a charge to transmit knowledge, but they must also emphasize the aspect of responsibility inherent in the use of knowledge. The problem is to arouse and foster intellectual qualities and aesthetic activity. Students should be inspired by a passion for truth and beauty and exercise self-discipline to achieve these ends.

It is difficult to fathom, but many educational institutions operate without defined objectives or statements of purpose instilled and reinforced within the faculty and student body. This is a challenge for administrators and faculty, and part of the problem is related to governmental influence. As a result of direct government grants, academic capitalism is now a significant professional concern. The activity of many scholars can be explained in terms of the "McNamara syndrome"--power hungry technocrats on the prowl. This is a deplorable situation. The educational system in some quarters now resembles a model of capitalism. The concepts of competition, power, and bigness are practiced by some scholars and imulated by many students. Higher education in particular harbors numerous hustling, intellectual, phonies (administrators, faculty and students). A more useful example can be set by a creative scholar. This person enjoys the freedom won by the mastery of a discipline and at the same time has an understanding of the delicate problems associated with human nature.

Teachers, administrators, and students at all levels within education should understand the concepts of freedom and contingency

in order to offset the mentality found in the "McNamara syndrome." People can start with the best of intentions and a brilliant cognitive facility yet still be dupes for power and sophisticated technology. The results can be ugly and tragic.

'We take that hill' the colonel cried.
And so they did, though most of them died,
And the enemy were their own side.

W. H. Auden¹¹ .

Notes

1. David Halberstam, The Best and The Brightest (Greenwich, Connecticut: Fawcett Publications, 1969), p. 268.
2. Ludwig Wittgenstein quoted by Morris Lazzerowitz, "Wittgenstein on the Nature of Philosophy" in Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Man and His Philosophy ed. by K. T. Fann (New York: Dell Publishing, 1967), p. 147.
3. Halberstam, The Best and The Brightest, p. 263.
4. Ibid., p. 264.
5. Alfred North Whitehead, Science and the Modern World (New York: The Free Press, 1925).
6. J. Alexander Gunn, Modern French Philosophy (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1922), p. 162.
7. John Dewey, How We Think (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1933), p. 90.
8. Leon Hymovitz, "After the Holocaust." The Educational Forum 42 (May, 1978), p. 435.
9. Jacques Barzun, Of Human Freedom (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1939).
10. Peter L. Berger, Brigitte Berger and Hansfried Kellner, The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), p. 235.
11. W. H. Auden, The English Auden ed. by Edward Mendelson (New York: Random House, 1977), p. 50.